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ABSTRACT

Following his own advice that elders of the tribe share their knowledge so that "the way of the Indians would come back to the children of today," Pete Beaverhead (1899-1975) tells of the traditions of respect and honor surrounding the eagle feather in a booklet illustrated with black and white drawings. The eagle is an Indian symbol of power and strength and it is believed by many tribes that the eagle's spirit is alive in even the smallest of its feathers. Eagle feathers were used for many things: in battles, for celebration, and for Indian medicine. Eagle feathers were earned through bravery by killing enemies or by stealing horses. Stripes for earning the feathers were marked on coup sticks. When an Indian's coup stick was marked by many stripes, he earned the right to use eagle feathers, tied on banners, an Indian flag in battle and as a means of ranking among those to be chosen as a new chief. Eagle feathers were also used on shields that were kept mounted in front of the tepee or carried by the Indian wife on her horse when moving. (NEC)

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INTRODUCTION

Pete Beaverhead, 1899 - 1975, was one of the first consultants for the Flathead Culture Program. He encouraged his peers and other elders of the tribe to share with us their knowledge so that "the way of the Indians would come back to the children of today."

In the following story of the "Eagle Feathers - Highest Honor", Pete tells us how important the eagle feather is to the people of old.

Today the many tribes of Indian people honoring cultural traditions hold this same respect and honor for the Eagle feathers. The Eagle represents power, strength, and is a creation of the Great Spirit. It's spirit is alive in even the smallest of feathers.

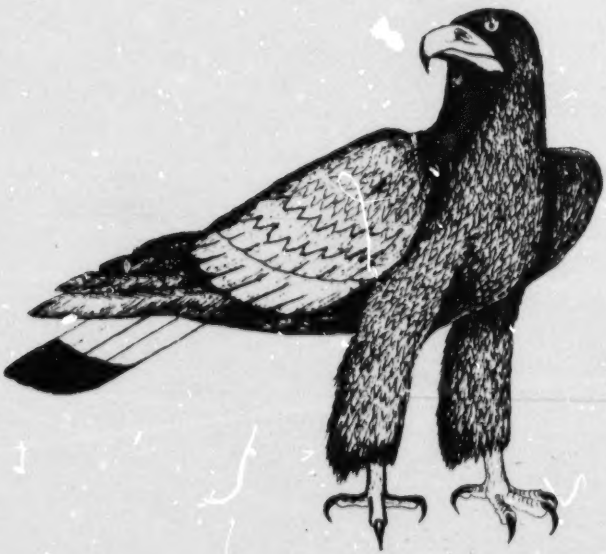
Because of this when a feather is dropped a ceremonial dance must be done to "pick up" the feather by warriors of the tribe. This is done to pray for the

person who dropped the feather and out of respect for the eagle and all that it represents.

In respect to our ancestors and to carry on our own ideals, we proudly continue this tradition taught to us by our elders.

Clarence Woodcock
Chairman
Flathead Culture Committee

The eagles were respected very highly by the old Indians. They used eagle feathers for many things. They were used in battles, for celebrations, and for their Indian medicine. Feathers were always regarded very highly.



When I first began to know about things, the eagle was already here. It srayed here in the spring. They wouldn't leave in winter and come back in the spring. They used to be here all year around.

Fagle feathers and stripes were earned through bravery. Coup sticks were marked with stripes to show your brave deeds against the enemy. The stripes were earned by killing enemies or by stealing horses.

If you were fighting in a war and one of the enemy was killed near you and he fell down, even if you didn't kill him, you would do your best to reach him and hit him with this stick. You would yell, "Wah-hay", then this would be one mark for you.

After the fight was over and you had all stopped fighting, the lead warriors would look over the dead enemies and remember and keep count of who all had performed brave deeds. The leader or Chief would tell you to mark your coup stick.

You would mark it. This meant a great deal and it meant you had earned another eagle feather.

A coup stick in the Salish Language was your spmíntən. A man marked his coup stick until he got many stripes. He then

had the right to raise the eagle flag.

When a man earned the right to use eagle feathers for a flag, this was a very high honor. When they were tied on their banners, this was the Indian flag.

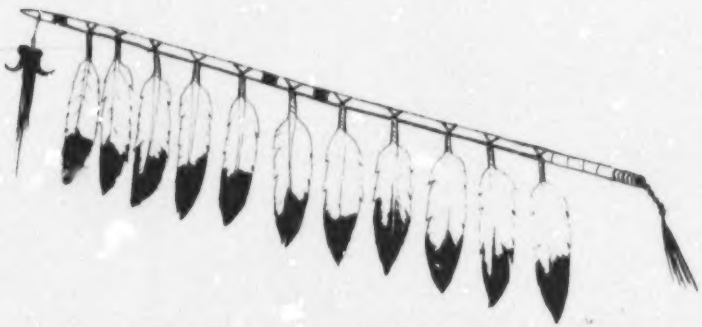
If there was a battle going and a man was positioned next to the flag, he would not turn back. He would be responsible for taking care of the flag. The flag would be stuck in the ground. This would keep the Indians going. If a man happened to get wounded or killed and he dropped the flag, the one who is closest to the flag who is next in line to become leader, would grab the flag up and stick it back in the ground.

The Indian shield, šʌe, is the same way. The person who is next in line to become leader and has already made himself a shield, could take up the shield of a fallen warrior.

When the Indians are battling and the enemy, the other tribe, is some distance

away, a man would get on his horse and ride through the middle holding his shield. He would keep moving his shield around all the time so that he would not get hit by the enemy. While he was being shot at, this man would ride down the line carrying his shield until he came to the end. He would do this maybe twice. The leader would say "that's enough, stop now". This man could then mark his stick twice. He would become a leader.

After everything was over and calmed down, the leaders would have all your deeds marked. The head Chiefs would tell you, this is how many good deeds you have done. Mark each one down on your coup stick. By this time you would have many stripes to show.



You would be getting very near to being as high as the Head Chiefs. There would be many warriors who had earned places next to the head Chiefs with as many as 10 to 15 stripes. If one of the head Chiefs died, you would be one of the men who would be next in line to be chosen as head Chief. It might be you who would be chosen to take the dead Chiefs place.

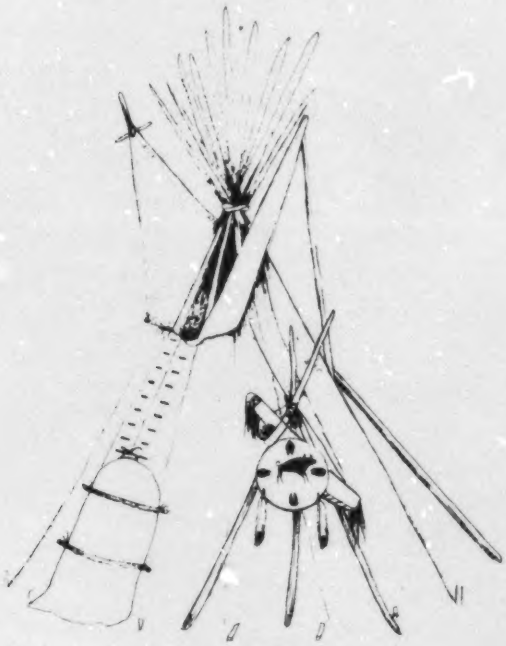
Also in battle you would use your special powers, war paint. You would put red marks on your face. Marks would also be out on your horse (hand prints). These take the place of blood. When your own people see you, they will think highly of you. They'll know you are smart. That is why you put stripes on your face and hand prints on your horse before battle. It will be hard for the enemy to kill you before the battle ends.

You that have nothing to show, no marks, it is almost certain that as soon as you reach the enemy lines you will be wounded or killed.

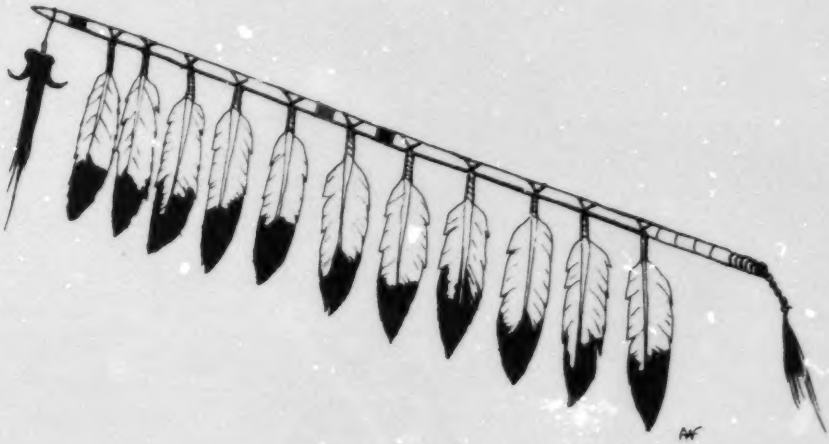
There are a lot of ways that you will be able to earn marks for your coup stick.

During your vision quest, the eagle or feathers will most certain be a part of it. This is where the eagle feathers are regarded as the highest honor. This is why the Indians of long ago never played with the eagle feather.

If you had a shield, these feathers are tied on the round part. They would take four poles when they put up a teepee then erect them in front. This is where your shield was kept. Your wife would be responsible to



carry it on her horse when you moved. Most of the time it will be hung in front of her horse around his neck. If you are going to fight, you take it from her horse and use it.



The old Indians used feathers in many ways. They had a lot of meaning.

They were honored then and today like the whiteman honors the American Flag. They honor their flag and the Indians honor eagle feathers in the same way.

Able Woodcock, Illustrator